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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S VISIT TO META, JUNE 12, 2008

¶1. SUMMARY: The Ambassador traveled on June 12 to the historically conflict-plagued Department of Meta to meet with local political, security, and civil society representatives and highlight USG efforts to assist the GOC in consolidating security gains made in territory previously occupied by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC). Interlocutors emphasized the improved security situation in the region and the need for more resources to support education and internally displaced persons (IDPs) and increased private sector investment in Meta. In Villavicencio, the Ambassador visited United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-supported programs such as education for IDPs and providing telecommunications connectivity and justice sector services to isolated, rural areas of the country. The Ambassador also traveled to Vista Hermosa in western Meta, until recently a FARC stronghold, to meet with Colombian military officials and inaugurate a U.S. funded dining facility for the elderly. The visit received extensive and positive press coverage and underscored the improved security situation in Meta. END SUMMARY.

USAID Focuses on Education and the Judicial Sector

¶2. The Ambassador began the day with a visit to a regional processing and registration center for IDPs where USAID supports a program to provide literacy services. The center is the first stop for IDPs seeking humanitarian assistance and access to social services. The Ambassador, joined by the Meta Governor Dario Vasquez and Villavicencio Mayor Raul Franco, toured the facility and was briefed on the center's IDP registry system and available services. The Ambassador concluded the visit by interacting with program beneficiaries and making a book donation to support the center's literacy activities. The USG supports this literacy initiative in alliance with the Ministry of Education, the Pan-American Development Foundation, and Citibank to provide literacy services to some 11,000 IDPs and vulnerable youth and adults in seven departments in Colombia.

¶3. In a ceremony with Governor Vasquez, Mayor Franco, the President of the Villavicencio Chamber of Commerce, and the President of Avantel Colombia, the Ambassador launched USAID's education-centered Last Mile Initiative for the Department of Meta. This initiative will provide telecommunications connectivity for underserved and rural populations, as well as education to support economic and social development. Major contributors to this public-private alliance are Avantel, Intel, Cisco, Microsoft, Google, the Department of Meta, the City of Villavicencio, and the Ministry of Communications. Overall, the USG-provided equipment and training will connect 50 municipalities in the Departments of Meta, Huila, and Magdalena, including 21,000 small businesses and 325,000 institutions such as schools, hospitals, justice houses, and local government offices.

¶4. Highlighting USG justice sector assistance, the Ambassador visited a virtual courtroom in Villavicencio supported by USAID's

Justice Sector Reform Program. Virtual courtrooms use video conferencing technology to extend formal justice sector services to isolated, post-conflict areas of the country by connecting judges in urban areas with police, prosecutors, and public defenders in remote areas of Colombia. The Ambassador met with the Chief Magistrate of the Meta Superior Council and representatives from the Prosecutor's and Public Defender's offices and participated in a demonstration of the virtual courtroom technology. Installed this past February, the Villavicencio virtual courtroom connects the main courthouse in Villavicencio with smaller municipal courts in Puerto Carreno (Vichada), Puerto Inirida (Guainia), Mitu (Vaupes), and San Jose Del Guaviare (Guaviare). To date, judges sitting in Villavicencio have conducted approximately 50 virtual criminal hearings with officials in these municipalities, including criminal appeals trials, evidentiary hearings and pre-trial detention hearings. USAID plans to install 14 additional virtual courtrooms to serve rural locations across Colombia in the coming year.

Meeting with Local Mayors and Governor of Meta

15. The Ambassador met privately with Governor Vasquez, Mayor Franco, and Granada Mayor Juan Carlos Mendoza Rendon. The Ambassador recalled his previous meeting of March 3 with Mayor Franco regarding education and again committed to support education initiatives in Villavicencio and throughout Meta. Mayor Franco stressed that the low education level in Villavicencio schools is causing high levels of unemployment in Villavicencio and the region.

Mayor Franco asked for USG assistance to enhance educational capacity in Villavicencio and throughout the Department, through English programs, technical assistance, and help with providing computers to schools and students.

16. The Ambassador also reiterated his support for the Coordination Plan for Macarena (PCIM) currently being implemented by the GOC's Center for Coordinated Integrated Action in six municipalities of southwest Meta. Governor Vasquez thanked the Ambassador for his support, but highlighted the need for additional coordination, not just within the GOC, but among other actors in the Department, such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and non-governmental organizations. The Governor and Mayors acknowledged the importance of PCIM, but continue to be concerned about security threats in the Department posed by the FARC and criminal groups. Similarly, all expressed concern over the high levels of IDPs in Meta, among the highest in Colombia, and asked for USG assistance to help respond to the problem.

Meta: Seeking U.S. Investment

17. Villavicencio Chamber of Commerce Board President Martha Isabel Plazas and Executive President Carlos Alberto Lopez briefed the Ambassador over lunch on Meta's economic potential and challenges. Plazas, Lopez, and attending Chamber Board members agreed that significant improvements in the security situation have provided new opportunities for investment in agriculture, fisheries, and tourism.

Citing Meta's favorable climate and soil and abundant water resources, Chamber representatives identified sugar and tropical fruits as particularly strong investment prospects for the Department. They also requested USG assistance to encourage investment in tourism and biofuels, including potentially sponsoring a trade and investment delegation. The Ambassador applauded Meta's progress and affirmed the Embassy's interest in assisting economic development efforts with available resources such as English language training, USAID alternative development programs, and assistance to Colombian security forces. The Ambassador also underscored USG commitment to achieving approval of the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement, which he identified as an important tool for further sparking Meta's economic growth. Finally, the Ambassador encouraged Meta's private sector to support vocational education, including offering internships to local students, as key to building a long-term base for development.

Vista Hermosa: Visit to Former FARC Stronghold

18. Following lunch, the Ambassador traveled to Vista Hermosa, a small town located near the Macarena mountain range in western Meta.

The Ambassador's visit to Vista Hermosa received heavy press coverage and is notable because it is the first visit made by a foreign ambassador to a town that was a FARC stronghold only three years ago. It was one of the towns in the original FARC "despeje" (demilitarized zone) from 1998-2001.

¶9. In Vista Hermosa, the Ambassador visited the headquarters of the Colombian Army's 12th Mobile Brigade where he received a briefing from General Padilla, the Commander of the Colombian Armed Forces, 4th Division Commander General Quinones and Joint Task Force Omega Commander General Navas. General Quinones briefed on FARC infrastructure and colonization of the region, the success of military operations to push the FARC out of Vista Hermosa and other municipal centers and the continuing problem of coca cultivation in the nearby Macarena range. The Ambassador queried the generals on lessons learned from the Coordination Plan for Macarena and emphasized that aerial spraying is an efficient way to eradicate coca and should accompany voluntary and manual eradication efforts.

¶10. The Ambassador concluded his visit to Vista Hermosa by inaugurating a dining facility for the elderly funded by the U.S. Military Group's Civil Affairs program. The \$97,000 project responds to a request made by the Mayor of Vista Hermosa and supports the GOC's consolidation efforts in the Macarena region. The dining facility will assist some 80 elderly from the municipality of Vista Hermosa. Much of the town of Vista Hermosa attended the inauguration.

Positive Press Coverage

¶11. (U) The Ambassador's trip to Meta saw the turnout of many more local broadcast and print journalists than had been anticipated. An Associated Press photographer also accompanied for the Vista Hermosa portion of the visit. Media viewed this as an historic first: the sitting U.S. Ambassador traveled to the former heart of the war against terror in Colombia. El Tiempo (Colombia's largest and most influential daily, centrist, circ. 1,198,000/Sunday 2,247,300) ran a front page, above-the-fold picture of the Ambassador dancing the local step - el joropo - with a young girl from Villavicencio with the caption, "The U.S. Ambassador doesn't miss a step." RCN TV (the largest private Colombian TV network, audience 9,467,300) reported on the evening of the visit that "U.S. Ambassador William Brownfield arrived in the former war zone and from the municipality of Vista Hermosa, Meta, sent a message directly to the FARC: 'The moment is now for the FARC to liberate all of the hostages without conditions, to put down your arms and to end this cycle of violence.' " Upon the inauguration of the dining facility in Vista Hermosa, broadcast outlets, including RCN TV, Caracol TV, CM& Noticias (independent news broadcast, audience 507,000) and various radio stations, carried this quote from the Ambassador: "Three years ago, this event would have been impossible. We're seeing the light at the end of the tunnel."

BROWNFIELD